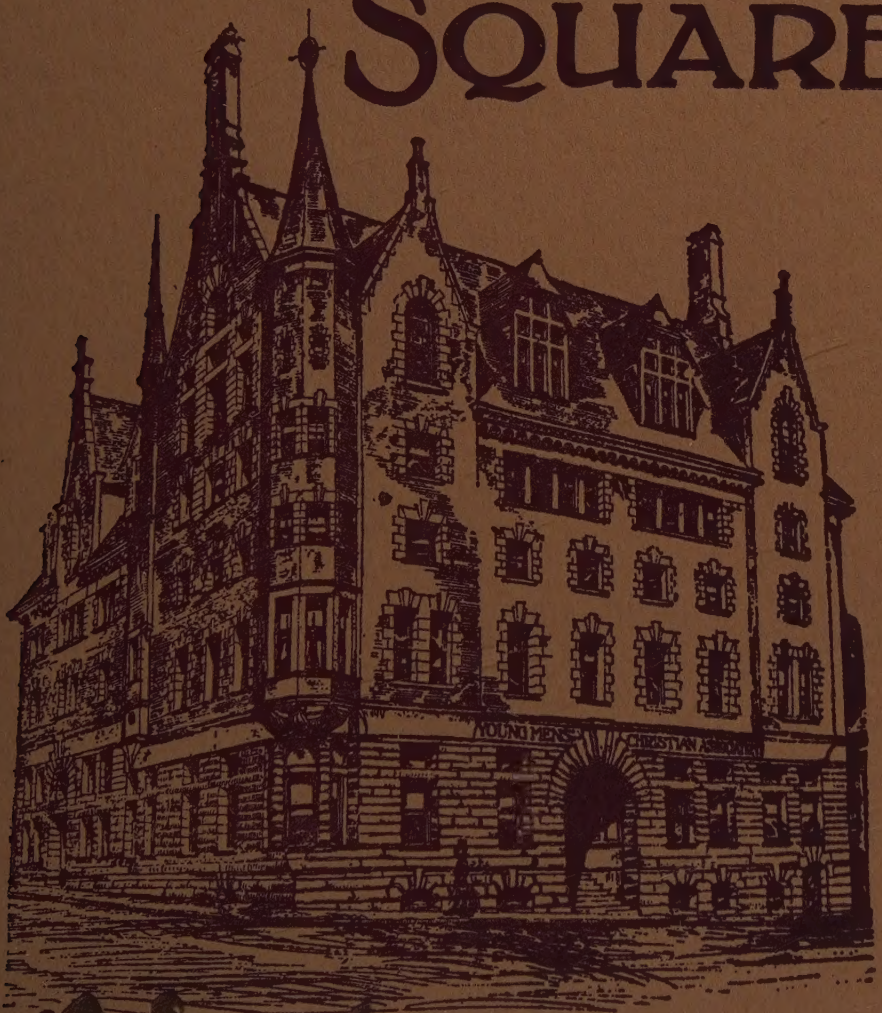
The Cathedral Square of Yesteryear



Monuments of Providence Book II

A SERIES DEDICATED TO EXCAVATING THE STORIES OF PROVIDENCE'S HISTORIC PLACES.

BY TAYLOR M. POLITES

MONUMENTS OF PROVIDENCE BOOK II

THE CATHEDRAL SQUARE

AUTHOR'S COLLECTION.

# of Yesteryear

A WALK THROUGH ONE OF PROVIDENCE'S GREAT PUBLIC SQUARES.

BY
TAYLOR M. POLITES

FUNDED BY A GRANT FROM THE
RHODE ISLAND COUNCIL FOR THE HUMANITIES

AND WITH SUPPORT FROM THE
PROVIDENCE PUBLIC LIBRARY

INTRODUCTION

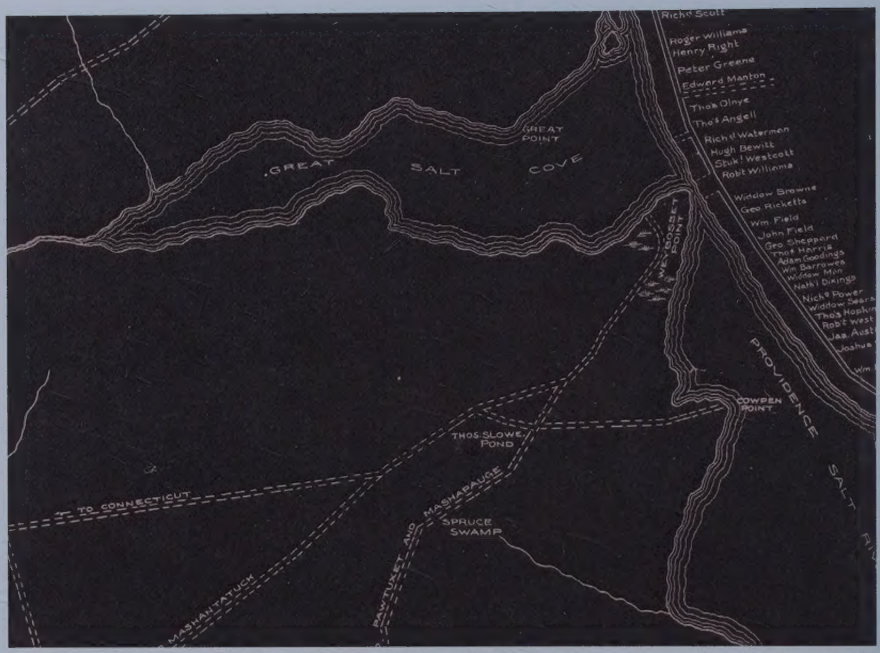
In the mid-twentieth century, the city of Providence was facing an inexorable loss of manufacturing jobs. The demographics told the story. From a population of 248,674 in 1950 to 156,804 in 1980, a city once called the "Bee Hive of Industry" was facing an urban catastrophe. What were the civic and business leaders to do? One response was to take advantage of Federal legislation that offered funds to redevelop blighted neighborhoods. The area around Cathedral Square was determined to be such a "blighted" place. Up-and-coming architect I.M. Pei and his team were invited to redesign the moribund urban landscape. His design and the choices made in its implementation gave the city of Providence the Cathedral Square we know today.

This booklet, funded by a grant from the Rhode Island Council for the Humanities, does not intend to question the redesign of the square, but rather to consider that one effect of such redevelopment programs is to erase the accumulation of physical markers that tell the story of a place. I cannot possibly tell all the stories here, but I hope, in partnership with the Providence Public Library and others, to build a digital resource that gathers as many stories as possible of this space and the now almost non-existent Pond Street, which once stretched up "Christian Hill" through today's high school campuses to Pearl Street. This booklet will serve as an introduction to imagining one corner of that old neighborhood and its life. By exploring the past of this once-important crossroads, the reader is invited to reconsider the story of this space and to contemplate how we might acknowledge the square's past and be active in shaping its future.

A view west on Westminster Street from Cathedral Square before the Doyle Monument c. 1900. The second building on the left (south) side is Metropolitan Hall, beside it is the Jeremiah Remington House. Across the square, the tallest building is the Imperial Theatre, decked in bunting. Author's collection.

Providence in 1908, from the atlas prepared by L.J. Richards and published in Worcester, Mass., in the Rhode Island Collection, Providence Public Library. Yellow indicates a wood frame building, red a brick structure, and gray stone.

1 Weybosset Street (c. 1710)
2 Arnold-Palmer House (c. 1830)
3 The Cathedral of Sts. Peter and Paul (1838 and 1889)
4 Remington House (1861)
5 The Doyle Monument (1889)
6 Y.M.C.A. Building (1890)
7 Tierney Building (1893)
8 Imperial Theatre (1902)
9 Metropolitan Hall (c. 1890)



A map created by Henry R. Chace for his work *Maps of Providence, R.I., 1650 - 1765 - 1770* (1914, published by the Rhode Island Historical Society). He imagines the network of paths across Weybosset. The trail to Pawtuxet and Mashapaug is the ancient Pequot Trail. He includes the branch highway that was laid out around 1710 to Plainfield (Westminster Street), and the trail to Mashantatuck (Cranston Street), which was laid out about 1717.

I. Weybosset Street

First, there was the landscape. Henry Chace's map from 1914 imagines the Great Salt Cove and the point of land to its south that reached toward the east side near today's College Street Bridge. To the west on a wooded slope rising from the tidal marsh at the edge of this great estuary was the spot that would become Cathedral Square

Indigineous tribes cut trails down that slope into the marsh, following that point of land to the shallows that were passable at low tide. Eventually, this crossing place was called Weybosset, a Narragansett place-name meaning "the fording place." This pathway was part of the ancient Pequot Trail, leading from the west and connecting with north-south trails across the estuary. Roger Williams in 1643 wrote about the frequency of Narragansett villages, large and small, throughout the region. The crossing became a meeting and trading ground for the tribes of this region, the Narragansett, Pequot, Massachusetts, Wampanoag, and Niantic. This path that we still use today (Weybosset and Broad Streets) is the oldest street in Providence, travelled by untold thousands in time beyond memory.

English immigrants fleeing persecution and political chaos in their home country began arriving after 1620. Roger Williams established a settlement near the Weybosset

In 1777, Stephen Avery, likely a soldier with the Continental Army, carved a map of Providence on his hunting horn. The tracing here is from John Hutchins Cady's scrapbooks. The southerly curve of Weybosset, shaped to the landscape, is now joined by the straight line of Westminster Street to form the junction that would become Cathedral Square. Courtesy of the Rhode Island Collection, Providence Public Library. The original horn is in the collection of the Rhode Island Historical Society.

crossing around 1636. The town grew in importance as a trading center. By 1710, a western highway to the English Plainfield settlement was established, branching off of this ancient Pequot Trail to skirt that ridge. As the century progressed, the marsh was filled, allowing Westminster Street to creep across the new land and climb "Christian Hill" to meet the Plainfield Road and create the junction that became Cathedral Square, visible above in the map created by Stephen Avery in 1777.

Like the intersection of Cranston Street (1717) and Plainfield Road just over the hill, now known as Canonicus Square, this juncture became a place of commerce where farmers and merchants traded goods. A hay scale at the intersection became a common reference point.

COACH AND CHAISE MAKING

The subscriber has commenced the above business, at the shop formerly occupied by Henry Sillsbee, at the junction of Broad and Westminster streets, opposite the Hay Scales, where he will execute all orders on the most reasonable terms.--Coaches and Chaises made and repaired at the shortest notice. IRA BLISS

-February 7, 1831, Providence Daily Journal

2. Arnold-Palmer House

Providence's mercantile economy of the 18th century focused increasingly on overseas trade, in particular luxury goods from China and the traffic in human beings from Africa. While the Quaker movement helped change opinions on slavery, more than one Rhode Island fortune was built on the slave trade. The capital resulting from this trade found opportunity in the revolutionary technology of textile mills that spurred the industrial growth of the new country.

By 1830, Providence had about seventeen thousand inhabitants and the business directory listed over 40 textile manufacturing concerns with agents in the city. Some of these newly-wealthy merchants built fine brick homes near the Hay Scales, changing the cityscape in time with the economy.

> One hundred and fourteen bales prime new Upland Cotton, for sale
> by DANIEL ARNOLD.
> -December 16, 1829, Providence Daily Journal

In 1825, flour and cotton merchant Daniel Arnold bought a lot near the hay scales. In 1827, cotton merchant Orray Taft also bought a lot on this western edge of town from

Left: A clipping portrait of Orray Taft from the Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs, The New York Public Library. Right: the Orray Taft house, once at the corner of Jackson and Westminster Streets, photographed by John Hutchins Cady sometime in the early twentieth century. Courtesy of the Rhode Island Collection, Providence Public Library.

The north side of Cathedral Square in the early 1890s. Seth Hunt, Jr.'s house is on the far left, occupied by his widow at the time. Next is the Arnold-Palmer house, today situated on the corner of Pine and Chestnut Streets. Next is the Asa Pierce house, originally identical to the Palmer house. Two more of these brick Federal-style houses, Amory Chapin's and Orray Taft's, completed the block on the other side of the 1860s mansion built by Dr. Fearing. The Rhode Island Historical Society.

landowner John Mathewson. By 1836, five handsome brick Federal-style residences lined the north side of the square. Architectural historian Norman Isham has attributed these houses to early Providence architect John Holden Greene, evidenced by the style--Greene's signature monitor roof among other details--and family tradition. Taft spent his early career in Savannah, Georgia, where Greene built a church in 1819. Close commercial connections between Providence and Southern cotton ports (and the system of slave labor and its peonage-like successor) existed as long as there were cotton mills in southern New England.

> NEW ORLEANS AND FLORIDA COTTON.—191 bales choice Louisiana and Mississippi Cotton, just received per schooner Clara Fisher; 225 do Florida Cotton, just received per brig Mount Hope, schr Geneva and sloop Angel, for sale by ORRAY TAFT, No. 3 South Water street. In Store.—Upland and Sea Island Cotton.
>
> -August 20, 1831, Providence Daily Journal

A change in ownership of Daniel Arnold's house reveals another change in the economy. John S. Palmer bought the house in 1863 for his family home. Palmer & Capron focused mainly on the manufacture of gold rings, serving the growing consumer market of the industrializing region. Palmer's descendants lived in the house until 1946.

In 1950, the home became the Grace & Hope Mission, serving the city's most vulnerable and evidencing another shift in the life of the square. In the 1960s, the Mission moved to Cranston Street. The house was saved from the wrecking ball by the Beneficent Congregational Church, which moved the structure to the corner of Pine and Chestnut Streets in 1967, the lone survivor of that moment in the square's history.

The Arnold-Palmer house in the early twentieth century, photographed by John Hutchins Cady, "Page 431," Rhode Island Collection, Providence Public Library.

3. The Cathedral of Sts. Peter and Paul

The first Catholic church in Providence was built here, on the south side of the junction of Westminster and Weybosset, the third in the state of Rhode Island after Newport and Pawtucket. The wealth created by the burgeoning textile industry that built the fine brick homes on the north side of the square also drew immigrants from other states and abroad. Irish immigration at this time transformed the city.

Bishop Fenwick of Boston sent priests as early as 1828 to minister to the Catholics of Providence. In 1832, Father John Corry, an Irish immigrant himself, began looking for a building site for a church, but because of discrimination against Catholics in the Protestant city, he could not purchase a site himself. Francis Hye, a merchant in the neighborhood and an Irish Catholic immigrant, managed to purchase a lot on Cathedral Square from Isaac Mathewson for $1,500. As Hye's daughter remembered in 1878, when Mathewson realized a Catholic church would be built on the lot, he offered to buy it back for $2,000. Corry, seeing the city's westward growth and the fine prospect of the site on high ground overlooking the city, declined. The first services were held as the church was being completed in November 1838.

On January 7, 1843, Father Corry offered a spirited defense of Catholicism in the *Providence Daily Journal* against accusations of Catholics burning Protestant Bibles:

> He goes on and alludes to the spirit of persecution, so often and falsely attributed to the Catholic religion. Long since, all those charges have been proved false. Political kanves and ambitious characters have persectued, under the mask of religion, to forward their own evil designs, but never did the Catholic religion. Was it the spirit of religion that persecuted the Quakers

"Old Cathedral," Rhode Island Photography Collection, Providence Public Library.

and Roger Williams, and the witches of Salem? or was it not rather the passions and prejudices of men? He might not have left Protestant America to go to Catholic Europe to find out tales of persecution.

By 1855, over ten thousand people in the city of about forty-eight thousand were born in Ireland. Over a third of the city was either born in Ireland or of Irish parents. These immigrants were both Protestant and Catholic, many coming from the more industrial northern counties.

Above: a turn-of-the-century postcard of the imposing Cathedral of Sts. Peter and Paul, completed in 1889. Opposite: a postcard view of the interior of the grand cathedral. Both from the author's collection.

In 1872, Rhode Island was elevated to its own diocese and the new bishop, Thomas Francis Hendricken, made plans for a grand church. Brooklyn-based, Irish-born architect Patrick Keely designed the massive Gothic-styled cathedral. On November 28, 1878, a cornerstone of Irish marble bearing an Irish cross was laid before as many as 10,000 people. Bishop Hendricken died only a few weeks before his Cathedral was completed. The new Cathedral was dedicated on June 30, 1889, a monument to the Irish Catholic story of Providence.

> Seldom has the New Year been welcomed in such a way in this city as it was this morning...While attendance at the various churches throughout the city was large, nevertheless it is seldom that such a crowd seeks admission to the Cathedral as the one that tried to find room for itself in that edifice last night. The doors were opened at 11:30, and long before that time there were many waiting for an opportunity to make their way into the structure.
>
> It took but a comparatively short time for the church to be filled, and then the crowd about the doors increased in size as the moments went by. It became necessary to close the doors, and to station policemen at the main entrance in order to keep the crowd back. Soon Cathedral square was well filled with a crowd of people anxiously waiting for the church to become sufficiently cleared to make their way to the interior of the structure, where the services were going on.
>
> -January 1, 1900, Providence Journal

4. Jeremiah Remington House

In 1861, Jeremiah Remington placed a copper box full of mementos inside a foundation wall of the double house he was having built on the north side of Cathedral Square, just a few doors down from the small, gable-ended Cathedral. The box held newspapers from 1827, the year of his birth. Others from April 1861 detailed the beginning of the Civil War. Also, various coins and lists of the carpenters and masons working on the house. The impressive brick building in the bracketed style rose above the older wood-frame houses, flaunting a two-tiered octagonal cupola.

Remington was born in 1827 to a prosperous Barrington farming family as industrial growth pulled people from the surrounding farm country into Providence like a magnet. He and his brother William did well in their fancy dry goods venture, selling ribbons and laces and other finery from a shop in the Arcade. Before they married, Remington's wife Hannah had sold the same baubles and trimmings. The magnet drew men and women alike into the shops and factories of the city. Just over fifty thousand people lived in Providence by 1860, over three times the 1830 population.

From *Providence Views, Old and New*, by Leander Baker, 1897. Rhode Island Collection, Providence Public Library.

A CARD

A Report having been in circulation, for some weeks past, that the undersigned and their families have been afflicted with the small pox, we deem it proper to state that such report (which is calculated to injure our business.) is wholly without foundation. Neither of the undersigned, nor any member of their families, have ever been afflicted with the disease named. The same can be said of all the persons in our employ, with one exception. One of the young ladies who has attended our store for some time past, has recently suffered slightly from an attack of the varioloid; but this person has wholly recovered her health. Having stated these facts, we deem further comment unnecessary.

REMINGTON & BROTHER, Nos. 2, 4, 6 and 8 Arcade.

-April 1, 1856, Providence Journal

Remington's copper box seems like a time capsule, but it also seems superstitious and magical. The house needed it: an insurance dispute reveals that someone had lit a barrel of gunpowder in the basement while the house was still under construction. The perpetrator was never found, and the insurance company refused to pay since Remington had not hired a night watchman. In 1873, as a contracting economy approached a panic, Remington was once again involved in an unpaid insurance claim. A fire in the shop inventory seemed suspicious. Eyewitnesses said Remington was the last to be seen in the storerooms. The fire started in three separate places. Remington was arrested, for which he later sued the police. He was not convicted of a crime and the insurance company did not pay his claim.

Remington died in 1892, and his widow Hannah lived in the house until her death in 1916. By the 1930s, car culture was beginning to dominate America. Trans-national highways were being built. Cities were being reshaped to serve the demands of cars and drivers. Westminster Street through Cathedral Square had become a part of the Route 6 cross country highway. In 1935, the brick double mansion was demolished to make way for a gas station, leading to the discovery of the long forgotten copper box.

* * * * *

While the car changed Cathedral Square in the 1930s, an earlier technological innovation changed the square from a prosperous residential neighborhood to a busy commercial and entertainment district. Track was laid for horse cars in 1864, carrying commuters to the fashionable new neighborhoods to the west and south.

CHANGE OF TIME ON THE UNION RAILROAD. -By the new schedule of time, elsewhere published in this paper, it will be perceived that horse cars will leave Hope street early enough in the morning to enable people to reach the early trains, or their places of employment on the west side before 7 o'clock. It will also be noticed that between 3 and 7 1/2 o'clock in the afternoon, cars will pass over the route between Market Square and Olneyville every five minutes. This arrangement will give great satisfaction to the patrons of the road as the Westminster and High street cars are almost always uncom-

fortably crowded during that period of the day. A car every five minutes to Olneyville! It is but a few years since an omnibus once in thirty minutes was thought to be ample accommodation.

-April 18, 1870, Providence Daily Journal

5. Mayor Thomas A. Doyle Monument

On June 3, 1889, a larger-than-life sculpture of deceased Providence Mayor Thomas A. Doyle was dedicated at the heart of the intersection of Westminster and Weybosset Streets. Just a few weeks later, the massive Gothic Revival Cathedral of rusticated brownstone was dedicated. The Irish Catholic church across from the Irish Protestant Mayor. Cathedral Square embodied both sides of the massive wave of Irish immigration that transformed the city.

Doyle was born of Irish immigrant parents. His father died when he was young. He was raised by a single mother with six brothers and sisters. He attended public schools before entering business in his teens and politics in his twenties. During his over eighteen years as mayor (from 1864 to 1886, with two interruptions), he oversaw the transformation of Providence from a "manufacturing village" to a small metropolis. Under Doyle's mayorship, the city grappled with problems of urbanization and density not so

H.H. Kitson's larger-than-life statue of Thomas A. Doyle as it is installed in mid-1889. The tall building with many windows just behind later became Metropolitan Hall. The unusual cupolas and bays of the Remington House peek out from behind the hall. "Statue of Thomas A. Doyle," Rhode Island Photography Collection, Providence Public Library.

different from today. The first public water and sewer systems were established under Doyle. The police force was organized. The school system expanded and Doyle oversaw a massive school-building program. He was reputed to be opinionated, wielding his veto power widely and disagreeing with virtually everyone at some point, but he also was known for integrity and his passion for the advancement of the city. He was referred to as the "People's Mayor" and his statue was paid for by popular subscription. The bronze sculpture sat in the middle of the square, looking down the steep hill of Westminster Street into the city Doyle loved.

English immigrant sculptor Henry Hudson Kitson designed the monument of over eight feet, which was cast at Gruet fils in Paris in a single casting, an unusual feat at the time, and weighed over 2,700 pounds. When the square was redeveloped, the fate of the statue was of little concern to the city, but Rev. Arthur E. Wilson of the Beneficent Congregational Church once again intervened to preserve another artifact from this moment of Providence's history. The statue adorns the corner of Weybosset and Chestnut Streets in front of the Beneficent Houses, built during the redevelopment program of the late 1960s.

Kitson married Bostonian and fellow sculptor Theo Alice Ruggles in 1889 and she, too, has a prominent sculpture in downtown Providence: *The Hiker*, which stands in Kennedy Plaza as a memorial to the American soldiers who fought in the imperial wars at the turn of the 20th century.

The dedication of Doyle's monument drew thousands. The view here is down Weybosset toward Beneficent Congregational Church. Tower of Thomas Tefft's Central Baptist Church on the left. "Thomas A. Doyle Monument Dedication," Rhode Island Photography Collection, Providence Public Library.

Behind the monuments of Cathedral Square, there are stories that have faded further from memory. On the left, Sarah E. Doyle, a tireless advocate and reformer for women's education (a portrait by Cecelia Beaux, courtesy of the RISD Museum). Right, Theo Alice Ruggles, wife of H.H. Kitson, and an extraordinarily successful sculptor with work that ornaments Providence and many other cities (Wikimedia Commons, from a book A *Woman of the Century*, published in 1893).

While Doyle ended up with the monument, he was not the only member of his family to work to transform the city and society. His sister Sarah E. Doyle also graduated from the Providence public schools. She dedicated her life to expanding opportunities for women's education. She was a principal of the girls' High School, a co-founder of the co-ed Rhode Island School of Design, and was influential in the effort to allow women to matriculate at Brown University. She was the first woman to receive an honorary degree from Brown (1894) and remained an advocate and activist throughout her life. These women represented the changes and opportunities the industrializing city offered to both sexes.

6. Y.M.C.A. Building

By 1890, there were over 130,000 people in Providence, almost eight times its 1830 population in only sixty years. The massive migrations of people from other states and countries was driven by the need for labor. Manufacturing output, too, had grown. Totaling $17.4 million in 1855, Providence was producing goods valued at $56 million in 1895. In America as in England, the extraordinary changes brought a host of anxieties. Churches had long been an organizing force in communities of all sizes. In Providence in 1853, a host of evangelical churches led by former mayor Amos Barstow established the Young Men's Christian Association to provide a moral and instructive place for young men who were tempted by the corrupting influences of the dangerous city. Providence's Y.M.C.A. was the second in the U.S. after Boston. The Y.M.C.A. was avowedly Christian and missionary at its birth—there was a presence, too, of 1850s-era

nativism that viewed foreign immigrants, and Catholics particularly, with suspicion and fear.

The Y soon adapted itself to the needs of the broader community. Women gained access to its library in 1857, 6,000 volumes, the first library in Providence accessible to the public. Men and women of all faiths took advantage of the lectures and English language courses, the employment bureau and technical classes. Youth programs were developed and a focus on body as well as mind evolved. The Y outgrew its early homes and in 1885 a fundraising campaign to build a new home began. Providence architecture firm Stone, Carpenter, and Willson designed the massive and eclectic structure on the corner of Jackson and Westminster, dressed in rusticated stone with high-pitched gables. The building opened in 1890; membership grew to over 2,500. An arched stone entryway welcomed visitors into the wood-panelled lobby. There were libraries, classrooms, reading rooms, bowling alleys, and a ladies' lounge. A meeting hall with a balcony accommodated nine hundred. A cross-timbered, state-of-the-art gymnasium was on the top floor, flooded with light.

The lifespan of the Y at this location was only twenty-two years. Very quickly, the needs of the city expanded beyond what the fanciful building in Cathedral Square could offer. In particular, dormitory space. The building was sold in 1912 and quickly demolished, a large office block taking its place, heralding yet another transition in the life of the square. The YMCA's new building, including rooms for young men, was built about 1913 on Broad Street, today Crossroads RI, a homeless services organization and shelter. The headquarters for the Greater Providence Y are still nearby.

A parlor in the Providence Y.M.C.A. about 1900. There were men's and women's parlors, classrooms, meeting rooms, libraries, a lecture hall, and a gymnasium on the top floor. The author's collection.

A postcard view of Cathedral Square about 1900. Orray Taft's house (c. 1830) is just visible on the left, then the Doyle Monument (1889), the Y.M.C.A. building (1890), and the Tierney Building (1893) occupying the triangle between Westminster and Weybosset Streets. The author's collection.

7. Tierney Building

The Tierney Building sat at the prominent junction of Westminster and Weybosset Streets, four floors of bay-windowed romance in old postcards, and seems more fit for San Francisco. The building was constructed in 1893 by a successful plumbing firm that was founded over twenty years earlier by two immigrant brothers, John and Patrick Tierney. Coming from Tipperary, Ireland, with their family in 1851 when they were boys, the family settled in South Norwalk, Connecticut, where the brothers attended public schools before apprenticing in the plumbing trade.

PLUMBING.
P. & J. TIERNEY
Licensed Plumbers

Have opened a place of business at 278 Westminster Street, where they intend to do plumbing in all its branches. Having had a large practical experience in the city of New York, they purpose to give their personal attention to all orders which we may be favored with. All orders for Pawtuxet water promptly attended to. Also dealers in

CHANDELIERS,
AND ALL KINDS OF GAS FIXTURES

-July 11, 1872, Providence Daily Journal

A view of the building prior to Patrick Tierney's 1893 reconstruction. A portion of the Tierney name can be seen on the sign on the Weybosset side. The latest sanitary appliances, wash basins and toilets, are displayed in the window. "Cathedral Square," Rhode Island Photograph Collection, PPL.

Providence under Mayor Doyle was undergoing a critical transformation—the construction of a public water system beginning in 1869 and a comprehensive sewage system (that emptied into Narragansett Bay) a few years later. The hygienic necessity of public water and sewage systems in the ever-growing city required private homes to connect in specific, regulated ways to these new systems. In 1871, the brothers, newly settled in Providence, advertised themselves as "licensed plumbers," a new designation that indicated the increasing professionalization of the trade. The Tierney brothers were in the right place at the right time, and they took advantage of the moment. The contract for the plumbing systems in the new City Hall was an early coup and led to other work on prominent buildings and residential clients.

Patrick bought the building and lot on Cathedral Square in 1888 and rebuilt the structure into its postcard-perfect shape in 1893. While John died in 1886, Patrick continued to lead the business and participate in the formalization and regulation of the plumbing industry, becoming head of a national plumbers trade organization in 1900. Patrick's death in 1904 received wide notice and his funeral took place across the street from the Tierney Building in Sts. Peter and Paul Cathedral.

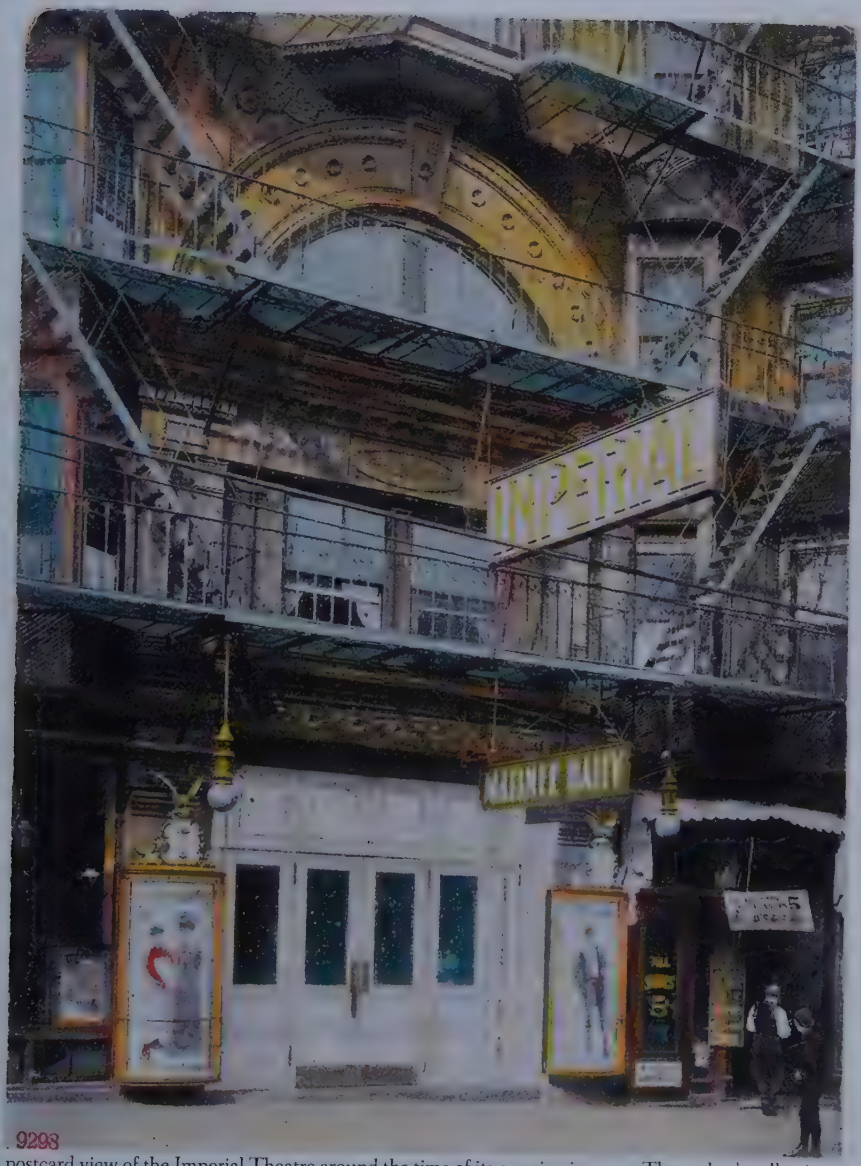
8. Imperial Theatre

In 1902, one of the last monumental buildings to adorn Cathedral Square had its grand opening: the Imperial Theatre. Providence by 1900 had become a city of over 175,000 with a thriving downtown theatre scene. Theatre impresario Col. Felix R. Wendelschaefer, who managed the Providence Opera House on Dorrance Street, envisioned another top drawer venue at the western edge of downtown in Cathedral Square. The Federal-style brick house built by grocer Asa Pierce around 1830 (and for many years a boarding house) was torn down to make way for the modern.

The Colwell & Gould-designed building had an impressive Italian Renaissance interior, offering about 2,000 seats in three tiers with large boxes framed by monumental columns. The front of the building appeared less impressive, with businesses on the ground floor flanking the box office, and bay-windowed bachelor apartments upstairs covered in scaffolding. On opening night, a floodlight created a spectacle in the square and the illuminated sign over the box office could be seen all the way from College Hill. The sold-out house enjoyed hometown sensation George M. Cohan and his family, who performed at that time as the Four Cohans.

Theatre-goers, however, were loathe to climb the hill west of downtown. The venue operated under a series of different names (the Shubert, the Colonial, the Capitol) and struggled with vaudeville offerings. In 1915, the Women's Political Equality League, whose headquarters were next door, protested the vulgar burlesque that was offered in the theatre and demanded representation on the city board of censors. They asked for support in their effort to elevate the offerings of the then-named Colonial from the Catholic Men's Club, also in the square. To little avail.

The square had become a scene of raucous public meetings, of people and traffic along the trolley lines, of entertainment and commerce and boarding houses. Street preachers harangued the passing crowds from the base of Doyle's statue. Political conventions and socialist debates were staged in the Imperial and across the street at Metropolitan Hall. Emma Goldman spoke at Metropolitan Hall about sex and marriage in 1915, scandalizing the newspapers. Maxim Gorky failed to appear at a packed Socialist Party meeting at the theatre, but local speakers, including two women, roused the crowd to a fever pitch.



A postcard view of the Imperial Theatre around the time of its opening in 1902. The author's collection.

In later years, the theatre became a true, flea-infested "scratch house." The bachelor apartments, touted for their luxury in 1902, were rented to both sexes by the late 1920s under the name Delmar Hotel, which was also a more unsavory place. Arrests and petty crimes littered the police docket. The decline of the square mirrored the decline of Providence. While the city reached a peak of about 250,000 in population by mid-century, textile jobs had been leaving since the 1920s. After World War II, the jobs left at a quicker pace. Modernization and the car seemed to be the path to saving the city. The Imperial was demolished in 1965 along with much of what remained of Cathedral Square's history.

> "I met him going up the stairs to the gallery of the old Colonial or Imperial theater on Cathedral Square. There was quite a crowd of us, scrambling up the stairway. I was nearly at the top when this fellow--he had freckles and red

The square in the 1960s, just before the demolition. The Arnold House is the Grace and Hope Mission. The Capitol Theatre (formerly the Imperial) has no roof. "View of Capitol Thatre," Rhode Island Photograph Collection, Providence Public Library.

hair, so I knew he was an Irisher--pushed me out of line. I tried to get back in my place, but he hauled off and hit me a clout that sent me sprawling the whole way down the flight of stairs."

--Boxer Ferdinando Gagliardo remembering how he started fighting, quoted in his obituary, August 5, 1974, Providence Sunday Journal.

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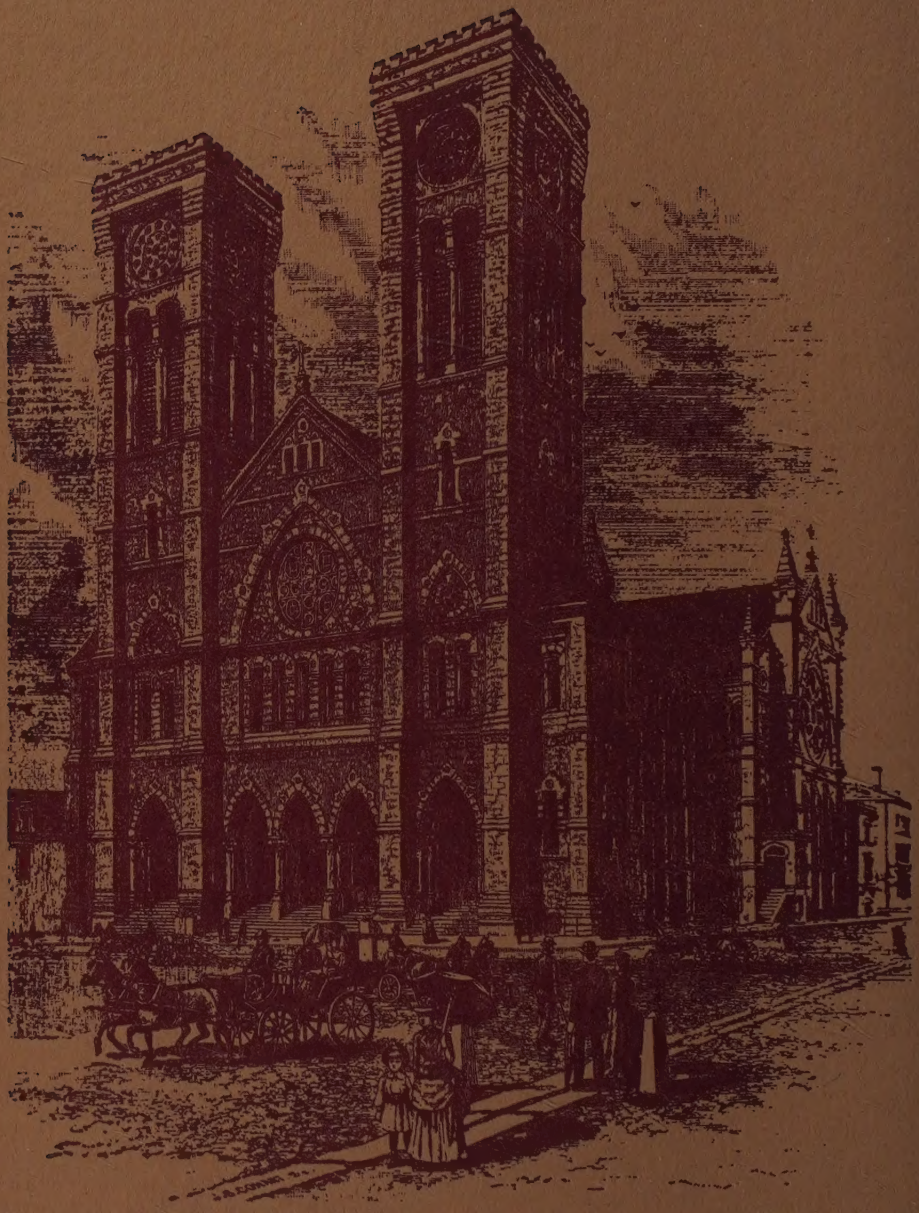
I.M. Pei's proposal for the redevelopment of Cathedral Square from 1963. Green represents a pre-existing structure. Orange represents new construction in Pei's plan. Blue indicates the new street pattern over the gray outlines of the neighborhood in 1908. Stripes indicate parking lots and dots represent pedestrian space. The connection from Weybosset to the square has been changed into a grid pattern and the square itself has been blocked from traffic. At the time, city leaders planned to make Westminster Street a pedestrian walkway from Dorrance Street to the square. Created by the author using the 1908 L.J. Richards plat map and the 1963 I.M. Pei and Associates proposal to the Providence Redevelopment Agency.



Engraving of the Cathedral of Ss. Peter and Paul, still under construction at the time, from Welcome Arnold Greene's *The Providence Plantations for 250 Years*, published in 1886. Private collection.

Front cover: Architectural drawing of the YMCA Building that once stood at the corner of Jackson and Westminster Streets (1890-1912). From the 1888 YMCA Annual Report. Rhode Island Collection, Providence Public Library

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